

# THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

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## THE ISSUE: COURT COMPLEX EXPANSION

# PROJECT IS NEEDED NOW

**O**f all government buildings in Arizona, the most outmoded and, likely, one of the most dangerous facilities out there is the Maricopa County court complex. It is an aging, rambling, overcrowded mess that needs replacing.

The county Board of Supervisors has made plans to do just that. The supervisors have set aside the money needed to pay cash for a \$340 million criminal court project. That is a rare phenomenon these days.

This project needs to go forward posthaste. With one notable exception — what appears to be a lack of nearby parking — the court tower appears well designed to meet the county's need for first-class courtroom space for many years to come.

The Maricopa County legal system is at a precipice. The county court system is among the leaders nationally in administering swift justice, but a growing caseload is bumping up against the hard reality of available courtroom space. In short, there isn't any more.

The antiquated complex of court facilities is completely filled.

Since 1998, the county courts have cut the length of time it takes to complete its cases by more than half. That admirable record is about to be thrown into reverse. By 2012, the system will be short at least 19 courtrooms, putting enormous strain on the entire system.

Something will have to give,

and the first thing to give will be justice.

Economically, the time to go forward with the nearly 700,000-square-foot project is now. The current downturn will reap real financial benefits: The first rounds of contract bids already have come back 20 percent under county estimates, according to project manager Kenny Harris.

County officials note that launching a substantial building project in these difficult economic times will help employ hundreds of construction workers. A nice consideration, that. But the primary motivation remains a desperate, immediate need.

The project will include "shelled" courtroom space that the county plans on growing into on an as-needed basis. It appears to have been designed thoughtfully ... with one exception: It offers virtually no additional parking. The only parking in the tower will be for judges.

Indeed, planned demolition of an on-site county parking structure is among the project's first phases, scheduled to begin within weeks.

The county provides a shuttle service from its parking lots near Eighth Avenue, which are more than a half-mile from the planned, new court tower. For families attending court proceedings, in particular, that shuttle system screams of inefficiency.

But there is no denying that the court tower, and the legal breathing room it will provide, is needed now.